

Section 1: Introduction

Purpose:

The purpose of the evaluation and appraisal report for the Gulf County Comprehensive Plan is to look back over the past seven years since the plan was adopted or amended and evaluate how well the plan is serving Gulf County. It is a time to consider the changes that have taken place and how the plan could be modified to reflect those changes. Most notably was the closing of the paper mill that was the county's largest employer. This triggered an economic change from an industrial base to a tourism based economy. It is the goal of this EAR to review the respective changes and make recommendations for amending the Comprehensive Plan to address and reflect Gulf County's future.

Profile:

Gulf County is located in Florida's Northwestern Panhandle, approximately 35 miles southeast of Panama City and 100 miles southwest of Tallahassee. The county is mostly rural and encompasses an area of 559 square miles. Gulf County is bordered on the North by Calhoun County, on the West by Bay County, on the East by Franklin and Liberty Counties and on the South by the Gulf of Mexico. Gulf County has an estimated population of 16,479 and a population density of approximately 24 persons per square mile. The county has two municipalities, the City of Port St. Joe with an estimated population of 3,707 and the City of Wewahitchka with an estimated population of 1,728. The majority of the commercial development is located within the two municipalities. The county seat is located in Port St. Joe. The communities of Cape San Blas; Indian Pass; St. Joe Beach; Beacon Hill; Overstreet; White City; Howard Creek; Dalkeith; Stonemill Creek and Kemp Cemetery are the predominately residential unincorporated areas of the county with a population estimated at 11,044.

Gulf County's natural resources are rich in diversity. Residents and visitors can enjoy the inland fishing and boating of the Intracoastal Waterway, Dead Lakes, Chipola and Apalachicola Rivers. The river system's is also home to the Tupelo gum tree that blossoms in the spring for only 14 days that yields the nectar that bees use to produces the world famous Tupelo honey. They can also enjoy the boating, fishing and scalloping of St. Joseph Bay and the shallow and blue water fishing of the Gulf of Mexico. The shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico is also home to beautiful beaches beginning at Indian Pass and ending at Beacon Hill and includes one of Florida's jewels in T.S. Stone State Park.

Public Participation: (163.3191[2][j], F.S.)

The public participation requirements of the EAR process was begun in 2006 with the two planning committees formed to address a strategic vision plan for the county and a strategic economic development plan. Both committees were successful in drafting their respective plans and the two plans were adopted by the Board of County Commissioners. The strategic vision plan incorporated the economic development plan as part of their vision plan. On October 2, 2006 an EAR/Visioning scoping meeting was held with twenty (20) concerned citizens in attendance. On January 17, 2007 the group met and form committees to address the target areas and agreed to meet monthly. As the committees submit their recommendations and are accepted

by the BOCC, the Goals, Objectives and Policies will be drafted to be included in the Comprehensive Plan. The EAR process is an ongoing item on the Planning and Development Review Board (PDRB) and is open to public discussion at each meeting as a public hearing. The transmittal EAR draft was presented to the BOCC at their June 26, 2007 meeting and made available to the public for review at the two libraries, Planning Department and Clerks Office. The plan was available for purchase in both CD and print at their cost. The transmittal document for ORC was approved by the BOCC on July 24 at a 5:00 pm Special Meeting. Adoption by ordinance is expected to be before the end of 2007 calendar year as part of the second adoption cycle per FS 163.

Overview and Visioning:

Since the 1998 EAR, Gulf County has experience several economic and social changes that impacted the development of the County. The economic impacts were the reduction in personal incomes and elevated land values. The loss of jobs began with the net ban that impacted the seafood industry which was the areas second biggest employer. The next round of job losses was to the manufacturing and industrial sectors that started with the paper mill and was followed by the railroad, MTI, Premier plus a lot of satellite business that were forced to close or reduce their work force. This sector had the greatest impact with loss of both employment and higher incomes. It was estimated 2,000 jobs were lost beginning with the net ban through the closing of the paper mill.

The County economy was in shambles and needed a quick fix. The quick fix turned out to be the real estate market and the State prison system. When the mill closed, the coastal real estate market mirrored our sister coastal counties and became the area's development focal point. Coastal development boomed with the addition of new parcels and actual housing construction. This open the opportunity for many displace workers to reapply many of their trade skills or learn a new trade in the housing construction field. Coastal development investment accelerated as investors speculated on property values increasing with the news that the St. Joe Company was successful in getting their WindMark DRI approved and moving US 98 inland away from the coastline. The prison system also offered additional employment opportunities with the expansion of Gulf Correctional Institute north of Wewahitchka. The success of the prison system along with other state and local government employment has become the County's largest and most stable employment sector.

Gulf County has, as part of its vision plan, a goal to develop a diversified economy without losing the character that Gulf County was traditionally known for. If the County is to accomplish this vision, the Comprehensive Plan has to become more favorable for non-residential development. Until the County is able to get a better handle on how the County will grow, the Plan needs to be flexible and not bound by 1990 policies and red tape regulations. The combination of 1990 policies and State regulations are burdensome enough to discourage any potential investor and cause them to look else where.

“PLANNING PROSPERITY BY MERGING THE TRADITIONAL WITH THE NEW” is the title for this EAR and signifies the County vision **“To ensure that Gulf County is the ideal place to live, work and play now and in the future”** and its mission **“To deliver outstanding leadership and services that enhances the quality of life for all Gulf County citizens.”**